



PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

The Advocacy Chronicles with Ruth Akulu

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Manju Chatani-Gada: This is *PxPulse: The Advocacy Chronicles*, where advocates highlight key issues and get into the nitty-gritty of what's at stake and how to win. Each episode is a discussion with one leading advocate and explores a campaign at the forefront of global health equity. We spotlight strategies that work, winning tactics and improvised solutions. I'm your host, Manju Chatani-Gada.

Today, I have the pleasure of speaking with Ruth Akulu, a dynamic advocate whose efforts have propelled her into influential spaces. As an advocacy officer with the International Community of Women Living with HIV AIDS (ICW) in Uganda, and a 2022 AVAC Advocacy Fellow, Ruth played a pivotal role in mobilizing Uganda's regulatory authorities for the Dual Prevention Pill, resulting in the establishment of the groundbreaking Product Regulator's Engagement Committee. Welcome, Ruth. I'm delighted to speak with you today.

Ruth Akulu: Thank you. Thank you. Manju.

Chatani-Gada: So first of all, Ruth, tell us, why did you work on this issue? How did you know this was something worth your blood, sweat and tears?

Akulu: So why I picked this issue is because of that research and the development of the DPP that was ongoing. So, the DPP will contain two indications that will prevent both unintended pregnancy and HIV. So, it is a game changer or a life changer for adolescent girls and young women who are now vulnerable to all these two unwanted scenarios. And in my country, adolescent girls and young women, mainly those at the university, access family planning products compared to HIV products because of the low perceived risk. And if you compare the two, most of them visit the family planning clinics. So having the prevention pill in the country, it's like hitting two birds with one stone. So if the product is delivered in a family planning clinic, it's going to be easier for adolescent girls to access the product that will also not only help them prevent unwanted pregnancy, but also prevent HIV acquisition. I also felt it was important that we start engaging the drug regulators while the product is still in research, to ensure that its introduction and rollout is fast-tracked in Uganda.

Chatani-Gada: I can understand why the Dual Prevention Pill is so exciting because in one product there is prevention for HIV as well as against unintended pregnancy. We know that many young women access family planning services and not HIV prevention services for both the low perceived risk but also the stigma of accessing HIV prevention services, which are often in the same clinics where treatment is provided. So having a product that does both at one time really could be a game changer, as you describe.

Akulu: Yes! That's it. It was worth my sweat because overwhelming new HIV infections among adolescent girls and young women, and also the overwhelming unintended pregnancies that have been registered in Uganda.

Chatani-Gada: That's great. You had the establishment of the product regulator's engagement committee. So tell me why is this a win?

Akulu: I won two things. One was securing a meeting with the National Drug Authority, and then secondly, the establishment of the Product Regulators Engagement Committee, a platform that will enhance or facilitate a dialog between community or the product end users and the National Drug Authority.

Chatani-Gada: Ruth, there are lots of platforms, lots of committees. What is different about this? Why is it important that this committee was set up?

Akulu: So, this committee was set up to facilitate an engagement between product end users and also regulators in the country. But also in that committee, one of the key stakeholders that would be engaged is the medical access regulators that is responsible for supply chain in the country. As a young person, it's always a little difficult to engage the big bodies like the regulators, especially if you have no experience or medical background.

Chatani-Gada: So this kind of committee has never existed before, and its development will not only allow direct access to product regulators, but it's also providing opportunities for young women to advocate for their needs directly with regulators *over any new HIV prevention product*, including the DPP, if it's approved- which may come as early as 2025. So how did you do it? What strategy made a difference? How did you actually get regulators to come to the table to even speak with you and others?

Akulu: First of all, I had to identify the person responsible for regulating the products. And that was with support from ICWEA. And after that I introduced myself and we set up a physical meeting where I also stated my purpose, why I would want to engage

them. And then later on, they agreed to come and participate in a national meeting that was organized between the community and also Ministry of Health and the regulators.

Chatani-Gada: Was it easy to do?

Akulu: No, no. At first, I was denied access to reach the person that I needed to engage because I didn't have a medical degree. But then I had to explain exactly what I do. And I had to show them that I was very knowledgeable about the Dual Prevention Pill. They asked me where the product is being developed, where it's being manufactured, and at what stage of research it is at? So, when they saw that I had all that information, that's when they gave me the audience. But also, I had a support system from the AVAC Fellows team and also the AGYW. Because the project that I was implementing focused on engagement of adolescent girls and young women to fast track the introduction and rollout of the Dual Prevention Pill.

Chatani-Gada: So, it sounds like having the evidence helped convince them and change their minds and bring them to the table. So as a sign that things are going in the right direction, what do you want to see happen next?

Akulu: First of all, I would love to look towards having a fully functional committee that would be able to track the whole introduction process right from manufacturing to the rollout to the end user. So, this committee is actually coming at the right time, but there are also other projects like the Dual Prevention Pill that is being developed or in their research pipeline, the multipurpose prevention technologies. And also in the country, there is an application that is being developed that will also track the introduction process of a product right from research to the end user. So it's going to be a great platform that will engage not only the regulators, but also funders like the Global Fund and PEPFAR.

Chatani-Gada: How are you going to monitor that and follow it up?

Akulu: So the committee will have a complete structure that would be monitoring its functionality, and indicators will be developed or put in place to track the progress of the committee.

Chatani-Gada: So, Ruth, if there are advocates in other countries who also want to engage with regulators but are having a really hard time, what advice do you have to them? What tips to get access?

Akulu: First thing I would say is be informed. Do your research on the reason why you would want to engage them. For me, it was the Dual Prevention Pill that motivated me to engage the regulators. So, you could be having a different reason why. But it's important that you are well equipped with information because the regulators are a bit intimidating, especially to a young woman or a young person. So you have to be prepared. We cannot work alone as advocates. We need to have evidence from the

community that they need this product. And before my engagement with the drug regulators, I had to do consultative meetings. So with that kind of information, it gave me a boost to engage the regulators because I knew that I wasn't going alone. I had a backup.

Chatani-Gada: That's a great set of lessons. She made sure she had the evidence, knew the science. The regulators knew she was representing the voices of young women in her community. Their priorities were at the heart of her demands for a platform for engagement. This raised her credibility and most remarkable of all, the key win of a committee that brings regulators and young women leaders together to consult on new HIV prevention projects, for the first time ever.

You've been listening to Px Pulse: The Advocacy Chronicles, engineered by Sam Bair in the New York Studios of the Relic Room. Our theme music was composed by Joe Stevens. The Advocacy Chronicles were produced by Jeanne Baron.